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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES PRE-ELECTION AZERBAIJAN WITH
EU SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE

REF: BAKU 687

Classified By: Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse, Reasons 1.4 (b,
d)

¶1. (C) Summary: EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus Peter Semneby won President Aliyev's commitment to launch an EU democracy dialogue with Azerbaijan, but met some resistance from the Foreign Minister, who suggested expanding the theme of the discussions. Azerbaijan's leaders have mixed objectives for the October 15 presidential elections, hoping to mollify the West's demands for free and fair elections while pressing for a strong show of support for President Aliyev. Jailed journalists, according to Aliyev, could be released after the election, but not likely ahead of it. Azerbaijan's leadership remains upset because of the U.S. Congress's focus on convicted former minister Farhad Aliyev in the recent Helsinki Commission hearings. Turkey-Armenia talks, which may have implications for Nagorno-Karabakh, may be a source of apprehension for Azerbaijan's leaders, even though they are not expressing concern publicly. President Aliyev seeks high-level visitors to Baku and regular meetings with European leaders to hasten the development of the Nabucco pipeline, which would further solidify Azerbaijan's reorientation toward the Euro-Atlantic community. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador met with EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus Peter Semneby August 1 to discuss his ongoing visit to Baku. Semneby had met with President Aliyev, Foreign Minister Mammadyarov and other Azerbaijani officials. French Ambassador Gabriel Keller, EU Commission representative and POLEC Counselor joined the conversation.

Democracy Dialogue

¶3. (C) Semneby said that his mission to Baku was to "take the pulse" of Azerbaijan ahead of the October 15 presidential elections. In high level meetings, he promoted the EU's proposed democracy dialogue with Azerbaijan. President Aliyev, he reported, again endorsed the initiative. Foreign Minister Mammadyarov, however, was less enthusiastic. Mammadyarov suggested combining the democracy dialogue with a discussion on joint security efforts, which currently takes place in another framework. Mammadyarov also noted that the human rights discussion with the EU should be broadened to include the human rights of Azerbaijan's internally displaced persons, resulting from the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, and asked for the EU to harmonize its European Neighborhood Policy vis-a-vis other countries in the neighborhood. Semneby said that the EU would now send a request to the GOAJ, noting President Aliyev's commitment to the process, to determine the dialogue's future structure

and agenda and to set dates for meetings. Semneby expects the Presidential Apparat, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of National Security and MFA to participate in future meetings, and expects to meet with President Aliyev himself annually in the context of the dialogue. The French Ambassador, representing the EU Presidency, has asked the Embassy for a briefing on the U.S. Democracy Dialogue.

Elections - Mixed Objectives

¶4. (C) Semneby said that, in his view, Azerbaijan's leadership worries that October elections will not result in "a good demonstration of a pluralistic political environment" in the country, and therefore will not convey a sense of legitimacy among international observers. Semneby described a struggle among authorities who simultaneously wish to show a "pluralistic atmosphere" for the sake of Western observers, but feel the need for a "demonstration of power and unity" at home. Throughout the ranks of government - in Baku and in the regions - there is the sentiment that there must be "a strong show of support for President Aliyev." Ambassador raised Azerbaijan's new law on freedom of assembly in the context of recent Musavat Party rallies, noting that these demonstrations, for which the authorities had denied permission in accordance with the new law, did not give a clear view on implementation of the law. Ambassador also highlighted a press release from that morning that stated that OSCE Ambassador Jose Luis Herrero would lead a pre-election dialogue between the governing party and members of the opposition.

Journalists to Remain Jailed Throughout Election Season

¶5. (C) Following a brief discussion of the Agil Khalil case (reftel), Semneby relayed "a somewhat positive message" on the media environment. At the Presidential Apparat, he had found that there might be an effort under preparation to release the remaining incarcerated journalists after the October elections. Ambassador asked about the possibility of an earlier release, ahead of the vote. Semneby said that, in his view, the current political environment in the country would not allow for it. Semneby added that, during his meetings with the President and others, he had not specifically asked for the release of the journalists or discussed specific cases.

Displeasure at Helsinki Commission Hearings

¶6. (C) Semneby told Ambassador that President Aliyev had expressed his displeasure with the United States because of the extended conversation at the recent Helsinki Commission hearings on the case of jailed former Minister of Economy Farhad Aliyev. The President raised with the EU delegation the notion of the United States' "triple standards" on human rights and democracy, vis-a-vis 1) Armenia, 2) Georgia and Ukraine and 3) the Gulf States/Middle East.

Nagorno-Karabakh: Worries of Turkey-Armenia Talks

¶7. (C) On Nagorno-Karabakh, Semneby noted that President Aliyev does not appear to think that the United States is "sincere" in its mediation efforts. The President, Semneby reported, now sees Yerevan as "economically and socially weak," i.e., suffering from far greater economic and social problems than Azerbaijan. The French Ambassador weighed in to note that Azerbaijani leaders are "much more concerned than they admit publicly" about the initiation of talks between Turkey and Armenia, and these developments might be a source of consternation in terms of the leadership's current thinking on NK.

Energy: Movement on Nabucco by Year-End

¶ 8. (C) Semneby noted that energy issues were intensively discussed in his Baku consultations, especially with President Aliyev. He highlighted several high profile events that are planned for the remaining months of this year, including a September 9-10 Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan joint energy conference in Baku, a proposed Nabucco conference in Europe, a November 14 energy summit in Baku (following previous presidential meetings in Kyiv, Vilnius and Krakow) and possibly a year-end Nabucco Summit in Brussels. Regarding the Nabucco project, Semneby said that Aliyev was insisting that "decisions must be taken by the end of the year," and that the President wants high-level officials in Brussels, European heads of government and Turkmenistan President Berdimuhamedov to meet in coming months to set the political framework.

¶ 9. (C) Aliyev's set out his strategy on Nabucco in detail according to Semneby, and urged that a Nabucco-plus Summit take place before the end of the year in Brussels to issue a political statement laying out next steps. Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan should press forward into European markets; Turkmenistan's participation, in that regard, is essential for Azerbaijan. Responding to the Ambassador's inquiry, Semneby said that a near-term visit to Baku by EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana is possible, but not yet in the works. Ambassador also noted that President Aliyev would appreciate a visit from French President Sarkozy, as France now has the EU Presidency. The French Ambassador wondered aloud how much progress could be made on Nabucco during France's tenure, given Sarkozy's approach to Turkey's EU membership ambitions.

Medvedev Visit: Russia Back in the Game

¶ 10. (C) Semneby asked Ambassador for her take on Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev's recent visit to Baku. Ambassador said that, in her opinion, the Russians wanted to send a strong signal, particularly on energy cooperation, to Azerbaijan. She added that there appeared to be no conclusive results from the visit, despite a large Russian

business contingent that accompanied the President. On NK, Russia raised the level at which it expressed support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, but did not change its message. Semneby agreed that Medvedev wanted to show that "Russia is back in the game." He commented on media speculation that Russia might sell out Armenia in favor of a natural gas deal with Azerbaijan, noting that, in his opinion, Russia would never jeopardize its long term position in Armenia to do so. Semneby also said that the Medvedev visit is a sign that Azerbaijan is now thinking in "multi-vector" terms, i.e., continuing its orientation toward the West, but, because of a lack of European engagement, also looking in other directions. Ambassador noted that this is precisely why the Nabucco project is so important. "It is about so much more than gas."

Comment:

¶ 11. (C) Semneby was impressed by the urgency and detail of President Aliyev's discussion of energy security and the need for urgent action on Nabucco. He said he would make Aliyev's case for an energy summit in Brussels, but could not predict the outcome. Turkmenistan emerged as very much at the core of President Aliyev's Southern Corridor energy plans. The President has suggested that Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan should work out the technical conditions to link offshore gas fields across the Caspian, that Turkey should exercise its 1998 contract to purchase Turkmenistan's gas via Azerbaijan, and that Nabucco and Europeans should seek gas purchasing agreements with Turkmenistan. The EU's intention to engage Azerbaijan in a formal discussion of democracy and human rights is positive and is an effort we should encourage.

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